

# The Making of a Buddhist Heretic: The Case of Sky-Blue Sect<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism, known in Burmese as *Buddhabatha-sāsana*, is the religion of the majority population in Myanmar, which functions as a linchpin of the country's national identity and retains a privileged position in its constitution. However, due to the religion being closely intertwined with people's moral values, the state has imposed narrow strictures on the Buddhist monastic community to make use of the moral authority of monks and wield wide influence over the population. Meanwhile, the conservatism of Myanmar sangha is sustained by its focus on specific aspects of canonical and commentarial knowledge, stipulated in the national monastic curriculum, and an examination focused form of study, limiting students' engagement in critical discussions and confining them to a 'purist' form of doctrinal Buddhism.

In this essay, I examine Mòpyar Gaing: a new Buddhist sect that came to prominence in the upper region of Myanmar in the 1980s, and was later taken to the state sangha judicial court following accusations of heresy.<sup>2</sup> Several locals remembered its founder; monk U Nyana, as a softly spoken serious meditator, but he was arrested in the early 1980s soon after the implementation of General Ne Win's purification policy, which imposed direct control over the conduct of members in the Buddhist monastic community, with the wider aim of restricting the proliferation of heretical groups.<sup>3</sup> Mòpyar Gaing literally

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<sup>1</sup> [ANONYMOUS NOTE] In transcribing Myanmar terms, I used the Okell's method of conventional transcription with accented heavy tones but removed most tonal marks for simplicity sake. For Pali words, however, I followed the Romanized version of Pali terms in Buddhist texts rather than those commonly used in Myanmar transcription.

<sup>2</sup>I came to hear about monk U Nyana when I arrived in Sagaing in the mid-1980s to conduct fieldwork in the area where he had some following. However, due to his imprisonment and his later status as a 'heretic', I could meet him only in 2019. I have observed the Lancaster University guidelines on ethics in research, which instruct not to disclose the identity of local participants, but U Nyana and his follower U Vicittasarabivamsa both expressed their wish not to be anonymized.

<sup>3</sup>In May 1980, General Ne Win's government convened the Sangha Convention of All Buddhist Gaing for the Purification, Perpetuation, and Propagation of Theravāda Buddhism, and in the name of 'purification', streamlined the sangha and imposed direct control over its monastic members. Only nine *gaings* or Buddhist sects have since become officially recognized by the state.

means ‘sky-blue sect’, a reference to the light-blue clothing worn by U Nyana and his followers. He gained notoriety for propagating the concept of ‘this-worldly karma’, which posed a challenge to traditional beliefs in karmic causality and rebirth by negating the widely accepted samsaric existences of 31 realms. He was not the first monk to challenge normative Buddhist teachings in Myanmar, or even the first to reject the existence of these realms of existence; but his logical explanations of his position fired the imagination of progressive individuals, both lay and monastic, and the popularity of his views led him into repeated conflict with the sangha establishment. As a result, U Nyana served three lengthy prison terms: 1983-1986, 1991-1998, and 2010-2016; the respective charges of which I will describe in a later section

Buddhism has developed discursively over the past millennia, via shifting interpretations and polemical debates within and among its many sub-traditions. Internal debates over what is or is not authentic have been integral to this process, especially in conservative Theravada circles, arguably leading to the emergence of a varying notion of Buddhist orthodoxy. For example, Abeysekara (2002) identified internal struggles within modern Sri Lanka’s sangha over what constitutes an ‘authentic’ Buddhist tradition, contended for by various factions that each saw itself as the ‘true’ custodian of the Buddha. Such factionalism has also always been rife in the monastic community in Myanmar, with tensions surfacing whenever a charismatic monk or the leader of an influential group propounds novel views; and such tensions have often ended in schisms. The Burmese term *gaing* for a sectarian grouping, derived from the Pali word *gana*, but has different connotations from the term *nikāya*, which is more commonly used in Sri Lanka to imply a ‘group’ or ‘sect’ (Mendelson 1975, 28; Ferguson 1978, 73).<sup>4</sup> *Gaing* may roughly denote any of three distinct phenomena in Myanmar: an ordination lineage; a Buddhist grouping led by a monk or a charismatic layperson; and a social movement known for its dissenting beliefs and practices. At times, monks or laymen – some casting themselves as *weikza* (wizard like figures believed to have supernatural powers) and others as *setkyamin* (a universal king who comes to restore the order) – indigenous prophetic figures that have propagated millenarian visions to reform the order through their respective *gaing*. Internal rivalries, although a source of threat to its communal unity, have also given Myanmar's sangha a kind of ‘resiliency’, which Mendelson saw as enabling monks to ‘adopt new

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<sup>4</sup>Ferguson (1978) described the term *gaing* as ‘a meeting or chapter of monks, as differentiated from the Sangha as a whole or the individual monks, [though] it can refer to an assemblage of any kind’.

Mendelson (1975) translated the same term as ‘monkish faction’ to reflect its implication of divisions within the sangha.

directions and emphases during periods of change' (1975, 70-71). In contemporary Myanmar, however, the term *gaing* has come to be used in a derogatory manner, especially by conservative monk scholars intent on imposing conformity and suppressing unorthodox interpretations and groupings.

The uncertainty that has accompanied Myanmar's political reform and major social transformation since 2011 has contributed to intra-communal tensions and the rise of Buddhist nationalism, on the pretext that the *Buddhabatha-sāsana* is under imminent threat.<sup>5</sup> Most transgressions by monastics that were deemed 'religious offences' were formerly tried by sangha judicial committees in their respective townships. However, the country's new social and political environment has included an extension of control over a range of public activities, including religion, by the former military junta as well as the current National League for Democracy (NLD) political party, through utilizing state mechanisms.<sup>6</sup> But this is not the only way in which past decades of social upheaval and widely perceived moral decay have led to a collision between religion and politics. Hence, the second part of this essay will examine how this changing socio-political environment has made U Nyana, a Buddhist monk with unorthodox views, into a 'public enemy'. His case offers us a unique opportunity to examine the specific political processes by which people and religious groups are deemed 'heretical' and condemned as 'deviant' due to the threat they are imagined to pose to the country's national security.

## 2. MÒPYAR GAING: HOW DID IT START?

The founder of Mòpyar Gaing, U Nyana, was born in 1938 in Pakhokku in the Magway Division. He became a novice at the age of 14 and was ordained in 1957 at Nandarama Monastery in Pakhokku. He was educated at several monasteries in Mandalay, including the prestigious Masòyein Kyaung-taik, and passed the state *Pathamapyan* (royal examinations) up to *Dhammacariya* degree level, which officially accredited him to teach the dhamma. He then spent several years in the quiet backwater of the Minwun Hills between Sagaing and Mingun, where he contemplated the words of the Buddha while

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<sup>5</sup>Recent narratives emphasize the threat from Islam, however, during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the major threat to Buddhist kingship was seen to come from the British colonial rule, giving rise to nationalistic feeling among Buddhist monks.

<sup>6</sup>NLD registered as a political party in December 2011, and in the 2012 by-elections won 43 of the 45 available seats, which led to a majority win in the 2015 general election. The lifting of censorship in 2013 has brought monks and lay activists out onto social media platforms to engage in debates about the state and religion, which as a result, instigated intra-communal tension and the rise of Buddhist nationalism.

meditating. It was around this time that rumours started to circulate about an *arahant* – a monk with superhuman qualities – which came to the attention of U Saw Myet, divisional officer of Department of Religious Affairs in Sagaing, then the administrative capital of the Sagaing Division.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, U Nyana was actively distributing pamphlets stating that the historical Sakyamuni was not able to disclose the ‘true’ dhamma, but that he could. This occurred in 1981, when the new purification policy came into effect, and the divisional office was given the new responsibility of keeping an eye on the more than 3,000 monks living in and around the Sagaing and Minwun hill ranges. U Nyana was reported to Sagaing Township’s sangha committee, and a tribunal was held in which senior monks from the locality decided that he had committed one of *Pārājika* offences by claiming to be an *arahant*.<sup>8</sup> U Nyana was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment by the divisional court and imprisoned in 1983, but won an appeal to the supreme court as judges regarded that the monk had not conducted any criminal offence and he was released in 1986.



Photograph of U Nyana after the interview, taken by the author on September 12, 2019

In the late 1980s, U Nyana started to wear sky-blue clothes to distinguish himself from other Myanmar monks, whom he referred to the ‘yellow robe wearing lot’. In a recent interview, he said that he had never referred to his group as *Mòpyar* or identified it as a *gaing*, but when his devotees started to follow his lead by wearing similar blue clothing, such labels came to be applied by the public.<sup>9</sup> In 1990, the Myanmar government’s State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) decreed that any formation of a new *gaing* would be punishable by up to three years in prison. This was soon followed by an accusation by other monks that U Nyana had founded a non-state-sanctioned, and therefore illegal, sect; this led to him being arrested and imprisoned again in 1991.

After his release in the wake of a second appeal in the late 1990s, U Nyana did not

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<sup>7</sup>‘Division’ was the term used before 2010, after which ‘District’ became the administrative designation.

<sup>8</sup>Around the same time as the first arrest of U Nyana in 1983, monk U Suriya Mònyo Sayadaw came to the attention of state Vinicchaya committee for publicly claiming to have attained *arahantship*.

<sup>9</sup>Interview with U Nyana, September 12, 2019.

relinquish the activities that had led to his arrest and continued to challenge the sangha establishment on the grounds of its inability to provide people with correct spiritual guidance. He disseminated his unique teachings by giving frequent dhamma talks, distributing CDs and video CDs, and publishing books and pamphlets. In 2004, a wealthy owner of a sugar company donated a plot of land in Putheingyi, on the outskirts of Mandalay City, to U Nyana. He named it 'Mòpyar Land', and it became the epicentre of his missionary activities.<sup>10</sup> Once again, his sermons attracted large numbers of followers, many from urban centres in Yangon and Mandalay; and this alarmed senior monks in the locality. In November 2008, the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (Naingandaw Thanga Maha Nayaka Aphwè, or MaHaNa for short) announced that they would take action against any writings, re-interpretations, public preaching or forms of dissemination that they regarded as counter to the orthodox teachings of Myanmar Theravada Buddhism. Following this, a group of five monks led by Bathanda Agga Nyanna of Chanmye Thazi Monastery officially denounced Mòpyar Gaing to the MaHaNa, on the grounds that U Nyana's teachings were *adhamma-vāda* (anti-Buddhist doctrine) and posed a grave danger to the purity of Myanmar Buddhism. In 2010, U Nyana was arrested for the third time as influential monks in the area put pressure on the civil authorities to issue an order, and this time it was on account of spreading false views.

### 3. *MICCHĀ-DITTHI*: CONTESTING REBIRTH

The doctrine of rebirth has been a topic of extensive debate in Buddhist circles from the Buddha's time in ancient India down to the present day. However, it is generally believed that the Buddha himself did not engage in debates related to rebirth, as he sought to avoid unnecessary disputes. According to the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, Ajita Kesakambalī – one of the six most important teachers in ancient India – was a materialist who saw himself as composed of earth, water, fire and air, and thus believed that nothing could survive the death of one's material body. Challenged by such views, 'early Buddhists had to defend this doctrine of rebirth when facing those who rejected the idea of any form of survival after death' (Anālayo 2018, 45).<sup>11</sup> The 62 *ditthi* (standpoints) discussed in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* provide some insight into what the Buddha and his inner circle considered to be misinterpretations or incorrect ways of reasoning, and the dangers of clinging onto such

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<sup>10</sup>The plot of land, a little less than an acre in Putheingyi, was confiscated by the state. Since his release from prison in January 2016, U Nyana has been fighting a court case to reclaim it, but so far without success.

<sup>11</sup>See also Harvey, Peter (2013), pp. 59-60.

viewpoints (DN I 12, 29).<sup>12</sup> Gethin (2004, 23) points out that the Buddhist scriptures ‘from the Brahmajāla Sutta to the Madhyamaka’ tend to ‘reduce all views to either annihilationism or eternalism’. To resolve this impasse, the concept of *anatta* – denoting a perception that everything about the self was essentially impermanent – emerged as a middle way between these extremes.

In the orthodox understanding of the Buddha’s doctrine, as described in the report by the Myanmar sangha following the 2011 Mòpyar tribunal, the *micchā-ditthi* (literally, ‘wrong view’, but usually translated as false view) at issue was the notion that there is no rebirth and that karmic actions lack consequences.<sup>13</sup> This is seen as ‘wrong’ because it hinders Buddhists from conducting good deeds that could help them achieve the spiritual progress stipulated in the Noble Eightfold Path. Buddhists in Myanmar generally believe that acting upon *micchā-ditthi* will result in unwholesome actions, followed by the accumulation of bad karma, which in turn will be manifested in low rebirth or no rebirth at all. In short, denial of rebirth is seen as a nihilistic view that one’s actions in the present do not have any moral meaning or consequences (Fuller 2005, 19).

Amongst many heretical groups and individuals listed as having propagated *micchā-ditthi* in Myanmar’s modern history,<sup>14</sup> the Burmese monk Shin Ukkattha (1897-1978) was probably one of the most prominent. In his early monastic career, he pursued a traditional route to becoming a dhamma teacher, trained in Pali grammar, Abhidhamma and Vinaya at prestigious monasteries in Mandalay. However, in the 1920s he was given the opportunity to study and work in India, where he was influenced by theosophy and communism. He also developed an interest in secular learning, which later led him to combine modern education with the dissemination of *Buddha sāsana*. Like other progressive monks of his time, Shin Ukkattha came into conflict with the sangha establishment as he advocated monasteries’ delivery of a broader kind of education (Janaka 2016, 117-119). His book *Lu-the Lu-phyit Pyatthanā* (*Die as a Human and be Reborn as a Human*), published in 1958, propounded his

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<sup>12</sup>These included 18 beliefs about the past and 44 beliefs about the future. It also talks about the ‘unattainable’ *nibbana*.

<sup>13</sup>In contrast, *Sammā-ditthi* (right view), alongside ‘right intension’, are listed in the context of Noble Eightfold Path under *paññā* (wisdom) as a pathway to understand the Four Noble Truths. However, holding on to either ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ is binary, and can lead to a ‘judgement’ as opposed to ‘pure wisdom’.

<sup>14</sup>Ashin Narada of Kyauk Thinbaw, U Myint Thein of Sule Gaing, and U Aye Maung of Sapei Beikman Gaing who asserted like many others that the Buddha did not preach the Abhidhamma.

central teaching: that anyone can be reborn as a human being in the next life, regardless of their unwholesome actions in this one, since Darwinian evolutionary theory shows that the human stage of evolution cannot be reversed. He further argued that Buddhists should not be ‘entangled in the bondage of religions through hope of heaven or fear of hell’ (Janaka 2016, 150). The views expressed in *Lu-the Lu-phyit Pyatthanā* led to his arrest the following year. Nevertheless, it was only in 1981, three years after his death, that a state sangha trial labelled his books *micchā-ditthi* and banned them.

For each case involving ‘wrong views’ that was brought before the MaHaNa, the sangha committee produced a detailed report, referencing large numbers of passages in canonical texts and commentaries to make their case that the defendant was *adhamma-vati* (a possessor of anti-Buddhist views). For instance, in the case of Mòpyar Gaing, the tribunal report listed 52 counts of *micchā-ditthi* and 20 additional ones against U Nyana personally, all described as going against the official teachings of Theravada Buddhism.<sup>15</sup> Although there is no positive evidence that U Nyana was influenced by the views of Shin Ukkatha, his main teachings, published as *Pyitsupan (Paccupanna) Kammavāda Buddhathā (The Buddhism of the Present Karma Doctrine)*, similarly reject some of the main canonical teachings of Myanmar Buddhism: rejecting the karmic causality of reward and retribution, and shifting the emphasis to the ‘here and now’. There is a widely shared religio-cultural understanding in Myanmar that life continues beyond a single physical life, and this sense of continuity permeates the worldview of Buddhists. U Nyana’s emphasis on the futility of worrying about the karmic effects that might or might not affect one in the future were therefore fundamentally challenging to Myanmar Buddhists, who are brought up to believe that *paticca samuppāda*; the 12 links of dependent origination, which starts with ignorance, is believed to propel us from one birth to the next due to karmic formations, underpinning its moral framework by encouraging wholesome deeds and discouraging bad ones.

#### 4. U NYANA’S VIEWPOINTS

U Nyana, however, did not deny rebirth outright, as some would have expected. His main point was that people should not waste their time conducting merit-making activities or worrying about the afterlife, since there was no way of confirming its existence. He explained to me that, after becoming immersed in the practice of meditation, he lost all interest in speculating about life after this one; and from that point onward, his principal concern was that people believed in the existence of afterlife blindly. In this context, he

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<sup>15</sup>The State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, official report no. 17, 2011.

cited a story in the *Apannaka Sutta* (Majjhima Nikaya, 60) in which the Buddha preaches to householders who have been exposed to contradictory views held by various teachers – some who denied rebirth, and others who affirmed it – and does not provide them with any concrete answer. U Nyana also wrote that there could be another life for some people, but there was no more for him (2005, 22). His rejection of the higher celestial realms and lower hellish abodes seemed to have arisen directly from the insight he gained from his experience of intense meditation, through which he came to believe that the death of his physical body would be his actual end.

In a TV interview in 2017,<sup>16</sup> U Nyana explained that, even if an unwholesome act is carried out by someone with a bad intention, and its immediate effect (e.g., an injury) shows that it was indeed bad, the perpetrator does not necessarily reap any karmic retribution in this life, since there is no guarantee that the ‘fruits’ of his bad action would ‘ripen’ immediately. The monk went on to state that violence is commonly inflicted on the poor and vulnerable in society, but that the aggressor often does not suffer any karmic consequences; it is the victims who are beaten up and suffer much pain, not the ones who beat them, that become traumatized. Worse, he said, the aggressor who inflicts the harm may end up achieving his/her aim by further intimidating and abusing the victim. It may be *hoped* that such evil persons will eventually suffer the consequences of their violent actions, but due to some good deeds performed in the distant past, they may enjoy pleasure and success first. It seems that the point U Nyana was trying to make on that occasion was that the Buddhist karmic law not only does little to redress social injustice, but magnifies victims’ suffering by encouraging acceptance of one’s fate, however bad it may be, and discouraging confrontation of one’s problems at their source.

In another conversation with me, he questioned the second Buddhist precept, against stealing. His rationale was that this precept has to be understood differently in a contemporary context in which, despite people trying to live as good Buddhists, their private property and land are easily taken away by multinationals and the state. (I felt he was probably referring to his Mòpyar Land, which was confiscated after his arrest.) He reasoned that if people’s hard-earned money was heavily taxed or their property was easily stolen without explanation, then there is little point in diligently observing the second precept, which only seems to result in more exploitation. He even went so far as to reject the chain of events described in dependent origination – i.e., the principle of conditionality, in which every situation arises due to a prior event as a precondition for the sequence of events – since in his view, belief in it merely endorses the status quo, disincentivises

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<sup>16</sup>DVB Burmese TV Channel, ‘Interview with U Nyana’, on January 5, 2017.



change, and disempowers people.

The first charge against U Nyana in the early 1980s was that he had claimed to be the only one who understood the ‘salvific’ truth, for which he devised the term *ariya*, taken from *ariya sacca*, and that it had liberated him from the state of ignorance that continued in *samsāra*. He explained the term *ariya* as implying ‘purity’ (Nyana 2005, 88-89), but more specifically defined it as a kind of supreme insight that could not be attained by blind faith or through traditional Buddhist practice. He actually contrasted *ariya* against *sacca* in the Four Noble Truths, claiming that the latter manifested only some features of truth. When explaining the Noble Truths, *tanhā* or ‘craving’ (literally, ‘thirst’) is usually described as the origin of *dukkha* (suffering), which subsequently result in rebirth. This ‘craving’ includes both craving for eternal life and for complete cessation, and it can even become the object of more craving (Williams, Tribe, and Wynne 2012, 32-33). Although *nibbāna* or enlightenment is normally understood to develop through the progressive three-fold training of *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom), U Nyana argued that *nibbāna* is not achieved as the result of the extinction of *tanhā*, as taught in the formula, since the effort of trying to extinguish craving only generated *upādāna*: i.e., more ‘clinging’ to the cause of one’s suffering. He explained that the ‘real’ truth was instead only found in the four stages of spiritual development – from stream-winner to *arahant* – and that the moment one enters the ‘stream’ is especially important (Nyana 2005, 30-31). That is, anyone who can enter the ‘stream’ is at least on the way to achieving a higher level of wisdom that is beyond any ‘judgment’ of right or wrong, and thus on the path to becoming liberated. He also specified that enlightenment could be attained if people focused on improving their Buddhist morality, and that observing the basic Five Precepts was therefore not only the most important practice for a lay Buddhist, but also more important for monastics than observing whole elaborate sets of monastic rules that had really just been designed to keep monastic organisations intact.

Since U Nyana has practised meditation for most of his life, even while in prison, it is conceivable that, in Buddhist terms, his understanding of reality could have developed beyond the ordinary. Indeed, the intensity of his practice could have led him to the realm of *ariya-bhūmi*, where one is completely freed from ‘defilements’. Pranke (2010, 459) noted that the notion of ‘awakening within one’s current lifetime’ was not particularly unusual in the nineteenth century Burma, and pointed out a passage in the *Sāsanavamsappadīpaka* stating that ‘should anyone choose to take up the practice of *vipassanā*, it is surely possible that that person could attain *arahantship* in a single lifetime’. Nonetheless, despite earlier accusations that U Nyana had claimed to be an

*arahant*, he was adamant in a recent conversation with me that he had never proclaimed himself to be one.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, he has written of his ability to teach the noble way (*ariya pyet-the lan*), citing as evidence the number of converts he made in prison, including some from other faiths. He said his desire to disseminate his ideas was spurred on by the hope that everyone would someday become ‘virtuous’ and live in peace and harmony with one another. He (Nyana 2005; 32) further specified that if only people could understand the ‘true’ teaching of the Buddha, there would be no more ethnic conflicts or intra-religious tension in the world; and that it was of the utmost importance to question the causes of the so-called three poisons – ignorance, greed, and hatred – rather than blindly following traditional Buddhist teachings.

The Mòpyar sermons present a curious mixture of fundamentalist and progressive ideas. On the one hand, they reveal an attempt to recapture the original intentions of the Buddha by seeking to understand why he uttered particular words; but on the other, seen through the lens of mainstream Theravada doctrine in Myanmar, they appear far-fetched in their interpretations. It seems likely that U Nyana’s emphasis on ‘this-worldly karma’ has a wider aim – that is, beyond focusing on the ‘here and now’ – of enabling people to live fuller lives, unmarred by either the fear of karmic retribution or the burden of serving the sangha in the hope of achieving a better afterlife. His ‘this-worldly karma’ is thus rooted in a wider vision that people can be empowered by freeing themselves from religious fatalism, blind faith, and cultural constraints. This appears to be confirmed by his emphasis on the importance of cultivating insight, being introspective about one’s actions, and reflecting on one’s decisions.

## **5. MODERNIST BUDDHISM OR MISINTERPRETATION OF THE DOCTRINE**

In some ways, U Nyana’s ideas resonate with those of the Thai reformist monk Buddhādāsa (1906-1993), who rejected the implications of karmic law, the Abhidhamma and the later commentary of Visudhimagga in his attempt to demystify Buddhism and return its focus to the original words of the Buddha. U Nyana’s ideas were similar to Buddhādāsa’s, both in their shifting of emphasis from ‘the transcendent to this world’ (Jackson 2003, 3), and in their reflection of a quest to break down social conventions that have defiled people (Swearer 1989, 7). However, unlike Buddhādāsa,

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<sup>17</sup>U Nyana, in a telephone conversation on February 3, 2017, said he had never professed to be an *arahant* and did not have any special powers that might prove that he was one – and added that if he had, he would not have been in prison for so long.

who reduced all supernatural conditions and non-empirical entities described in the scriptures to human psychological states, U Nyana was neither systematic nor thorough in his critique of Buddhism. Nor did he, unlike Buddhādāsa who advocated a utopian vision of ‘dhammic socialism’, articulate any overt political vision through his religious sermons.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, there is no evidence that U Nyana ever heard of Buddhādāsa’s work – or, indeed, about Santi Asoke: a blue-robe-wearing breakaway Buddhist sect in Thailand whose founder, Phra Bodhirak, was influenced by Buddhādāsa.<sup>19</sup> All questions of influence aside, what is remarkable about U Nyana is how *comprehensively* he denounced mainstream Buddhist teachings, to a degree that few had done in Myanmar since Shin Ukkattha, almost half a century earlier. As well as questioning whether Abhidhamma was a later addition to the Pali canon, U Nyana went so far as to question whether the historical Sakyamuni ever taught Abhidhamma himself, thus undermining almost everything that is accepted as normative teaching of Buddhist doctrine in Myanmar.

The principal concept expressed in U Nyana’s *Pyitsupan Kammavada Buddhabatha* (*Present-Karma Buddhism*) is that human life does not necessarily continue after death, and that karmic causality should therefore only be applied to this life. Even if there were life after death, he said, good actions would not always lead to good consequences; nor would bad ones lead to rebirth in hellish realms. In his most recent interview, U Nyana was adamant that the belief in karma attaches people to their past actions, even to the point of trapping them in a fear of reaping bad consequences.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, he saw Myanmar’s people as confined to a dualistic morality of right and wrong, in which the constant pressure to earn more merit only increased their mental burdens. In this respect, his Mòpyar teachings have placed the practice of *dāna* under scrutiny, since making offerings to the monastic community has strong implications for the donor’s social status and reputation – in apparent contradiction to Buddhism’s focus on getting rid of the ego and not seeking social acclaim or meritorious reward. U Nyana has often expressed his view that one should be generous just for the sake of it, and for no other reason. Specifically, in a Burmese TV interview, he stated that if one has any material surplus, one should give to

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<sup>18</sup>U Nyana does not mention or refer to the concepts of *citta wāng* (non-attachment) or *suññatā* (emptiness), which were fundamental themes for Buddhādāsa in his understanding of the world (Swearer 1989, 7).

<sup>19</sup>Phra Bodhirak is also outspoken in his criticism of the monastic practice of Thai sangha, calling for a return to the authentic words of the Buddha (Swearer 1989, 3).

<sup>20</sup>Interview with U Nyana, September 12, 2019.

the poor and social deprived rather than to monks, as it is important to be generous especially if it was intended to improve the lives of others rather than trying to achieve a better rebirth in an inconceivable future. Reasonable as they might appear to an outsider, however, such arguments were readily seen as attacks on the traditional practice of offering *dāna* to monastics, and thus as threatening to the interdependent relationship between the sangha and the Buddhist laity, as well as to the basic premise of worship centred on merit-making activities.

## 6. WHO WERE/ARE U NYANA'S FOLLOWERS?

U Nyana's anti-orthodox teachings attracted a large following of students and urban devotees, all of whom dressed in sky-blue clothes to indicate their nonconformist position. When Mòpyar was officially denounced in 2007, the names of its 425 devotees were made public, and they were made to sign a declaration that they would no longer engage in Mòpyar-related activities.<sup>21</sup> The majority of these supporters were from provincial towns in Upper Myanmar, in the regions of Sagaing (38 per cent) and Mandalay (16 per cent), while 6 per cent came from Pago District where U Nyana currently resides. Clusters of followers were from Kyaungu town (n=37) near Monywa, Wutlet (n=24) near Shwebo, Pinleibu (n=20) near Kawlin, and Amarapura (n=15) near Sagaing. Nonetheless, more than one-third of U Nyana's followers were from Yangon (n=94) and Mandalay (n=63), the two largest urban centres in Myanmar.<sup>22</sup> Compared to the general demography of Myanmar, they were urban and relatively well educated, almost 10 per cent of them having university degrees; and 90 members (21 per cent of the total) were female.

Several of the residents of Sagaing Town over the age of 50 told me they had heard about U Nyana and the 'sky-blue wearing sect', but most of these people were either reluctant to talk about them or had a skewed view of their membership. Some of my informants casually commented that Mòpyar's members were ex-communists and were 'crazy', and yet, former members I met during my intermittent interviews between 2014 and 2019 appeared to be perfectly normal and varied in their religious ideas. Many of them were well-educated and had become interested in U Nyana's unique interpretation of the Theravada doctrine through reading his books. His followers included musicians, artists, writers, engineers and civil servants, educated monks, students and even a retired chairman of a township council who had been active during U Ne Win's Socialist government. The former chairman said that, after having been an agnostic most of his life, he finally found

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<sup>21</sup>Pyitsupan Kammavada Bodapatha Thanidaná Mahasawdana (2008).

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

the ‘true’ dhamma when he read a booklet written by U Nyana. In my interview with him, he stated that the main point advocated by Mòpyar was to focus on the present life and be content with it.<sup>23</sup> He added that the Buddha did not actually teach about rebirth, and yet people focused too much on the whereabouts of an unforeseeable afterlife and expended too much energy on making offerings to the sangha.

Some of the Mòpyar followers I interviewed expressed anti-establishment sentiments, critiquing the Government as well as the sangha, and U Nyana’s modernizing Buddhist teachings seemed to appeal to them particularly strongly. Others mentioned that they did not like to observe the deferential protocol for addressing monks, or to prostrate themselves in front of them, but said that U Nyana did not care much about such formalities, and that they could sit and talk on the same level. U Nyana often invited his followers to question and challenge him; some were attracted to his free thinking, and others to his unconventional method of discussing the dhamma. In short, he appeared as a maverick, unlike any other Myanmar monk, and attracted followers who wanted to interrogate Myanmar Buddhism’s normative beliefs. U Nyana himself did not propose any specific programme of social reform or advocate a radical vision for remedying social ills, but he allowed people to be imaginative and think beyond the limits of orthodox Buddhism. One middle-aged male informant said that *Sayadaw* (this is how U Nyana is generally addressed) is inspiring because he leads people to contemplate the Buddha’s words by inviting them to participate in discussions about the dhamma in the present context. The same informant said that U Nyana also criticised the sangha establishment for being rigid and out of touch, and for delivering standardised sermons epitomising a kind of Buddhism that confined people to a sense of powerlessness.

In 2006, the National Vinicchaya Committee condemned one of U Nyana’s supporters, a monk named U Vicittasarabhivamsa, for colluding with another monk U Kheminda in the teaching of false views about meditation. This was followed in 2009 by an accusation that U Vicittasarabhivamsa was spreading *adhamma-vada* by rejecting the notion of karmic causality. He said he became a follower of U Nyana after he read one of his publications that highlighted the uncertainty of the existence of life after death. He told me that it was important to live one’s life to the best of one’s ability without worrying about the next one, a position similar to U Nyana’s. U Vicittasarabhivamsa, as the honorary suffix of *abhivamsa* (higher lineage) suggests, is a learned monk scholar; he had passed the advanced levels of the state *Pathamapyan* as well as the difficult *Sakyāsīha* examination and had held teaching positions at several monasteries in the Kachin state. At the time I spoke to

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<sup>23</sup>Interview in Sagaing, January 28, 2014.

him, he had been a Buddhist monk for 35 years. However, he said one of the reasons he had decided to join the Mòpyar group was that he could no longer bear the oppressive sangha politics that had negatively affected his monastic career.<sup>24</sup> Specifically, he said he had many ideas for how to inspire students and modernize teaching methods, but whenever he suggested such innovations to senior monks, they would join forces to marginalise him; and eventually, their inflexible and authoritarian ways made him depressed. He said that during those dark years, long before he met U Nyana, he came across his writings, and it was as if a new world had opened for him. In the early 2000s, he could no longer bear wearing yellow robes, so changed to sky-blue ones and went into hiding to escape arrest. He has since published several booklets in defence of U Nyana's 'this-worldly karma' doctrine, asserting that his teaching was indeed the *ariya dhamma* (true doctrine).<sup>25</sup> U Vicittasarabhivamsa turned away from society and isolated himself in the remote wilderness, but finally met U Nyana after the latter's release from prison in 2016, since which time they have been in regular contact, spending *vassa* together.

Another of U Nyana's monk followers that I interviewed expressed similar sentiments: that he had wanted to engage in open debates and teach Buddhism in a constructive way, but had his efforts hampered by a lack of free thinking among *pariyatti* monks or learned Buddhist scholars who are in decision-making positions. He saw himself as progressive in his interpretation of Buddhist doctrine, and wanted to promote modernist interpretations of Theravada Buddhism that made the Buddha's teachings more relevant to contemporary needs. Similarly, a lay follower of U Nyana who had moved to Singapore told me that traditional Buddhist teachings gave him no spiritual guidance in life, as they addressed neither corruption nor poverty in society. These sentiments were shared by many other devotees, who revealed deep frustration with the religious establishment, which they felt

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<sup>24</sup>Interview with U Vicittasarabhivamsa, September 21, 2019.

<sup>25</sup>In *Bodathathana Thamain-ahman* (2019), Vicittasarabhivamsa reiterates the viewpoint of U Nyana that the Buddha did not preach Abhidhamma and its contents do not represent the Buddha's words as they were reworks in later Buddhist Councils. It is noteworthy that modern Western scholarship dates the origin of Abhidhamma to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE; a few hundred years after the Buddha's passing. However, Abhidhamma studies have occupied a central position in the monastic education since King Mindon's reign in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and any challenge to its authenticity or severing its connection to the Buddha constitutes a major religious offence in Myanmar. The words in Patthāna (the last book of Abhidhamma), for example, are regarded to be exceptionally potent as the 'words of the Buddha', and is recited on important ceremonial occasions. His other book *Nyeinchan-ye Tayà Akweapyà* (2019) defends U Nyana's teaching of *Pyitsopan Kammawada* as the true doctrine.

did not engage with the social issues that affected their everyday lives.

A similar modernist sentiment was propounded by the award-winning author Myint Win Maung (also known as AZ). His 2009 book *Post-Modern hnit Ponnya Kriya Wut-tu Se-ba*<sup>26</sup> proposed a triadic relationship among the 10 meritorious deeds, the ‘this-worldly karma’ propagated by U Nyana, and the postmodern age. It explained how postmodernist ideas had been introduced into Myanmar through art, music, literature, and architecture even before its reopening to the outside world in 2011, and how new communication technology and the resultant influx of information were affecting the country’s people.<sup>27</sup> Myint Win Maung (2009, 33) advocated the importance of accepting other cultures and different religious values as a prerequisite for the construction of a democratic society. Although he has never openly confessed to being one of Mòpyar’s supporters, U Nyana’s devotees told me that I would understand their leader’s teachings better if I read Myint Win Maung’s book. Unwittingly, perhaps, U Nyana was interpreted as advocating a type of ‘engaged Buddhism’ that appealed to people who yearned for fundamental changes in Myanmar’s socio-political environment. Moreover, some of these followers came to see the possibility that the sangha was a stumbling block on the path to their ideal of social liberation and found in U Nyana an alternative vision and spiritual leadership more fitting to their contemporary needs.

## **7. PERFORMANCE-ORIENTED CULTURE AND THE DOMINANCE OF *PARIYATTI* MONKS**

Traditionally, a Vinaya transgression by a monk in Myanmar was dealt with either by the abbot of his monastery of affiliation, or by the offender’s preceptor or teacher(s); or in some cases, resolved through the mediation of senior monks in a lineage, or contained within the local monastic community.<sup>28</sup> It was only in the early 1980s that an official monastic judiciary was established to oversee sangha affairs at the state level, as

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<sup>26</sup>Translation for the title of this book is: *The Post-Modern Ten Kinds of Meritorious Deeds*.

<sup>27</sup>Myint Win Maung articulated Buddhist concepts that are relevant to modernist ideals. He wrote; ‘postmodernism is about original freedom, diversification, and the reorganisation of human existence, which has always been diverse and irreverent in many ways’ (my translation). He also described *bhavana* as a practice that can bring practical benefits if people focused on fundraising for good causes, improving health care, fostering education, alleviating poverty, preserving the environment, or dealing with global warming, etc. (2009, 40-2).

<sup>28</sup>Under the British colonial rule, the Buddhist monastic community retained a relative degree of autonomy in overseeing its internal affairs.

part of the Ne Win government's attempt to centralise the sangha and implement a state system of surveillance over monastic affairs.<sup>29</sup> Minor transgressions and monastic disputes continued to be resolved by township-level sangha Vinicchaya committees, and occasionally at Divisional sangha courts; but cases involving major disputes between Buddhist sects, or concerning non-*sāsana* properties and complicated heritage, were brought before the sangha judiciary at the state level.<sup>30</sup>

Under successive military regimes and down to the present day, monastic representatives – both monks and nuns – have worked closely with the secular authorities at each regional tier (divisional, township, and ward/village) to oversee monastic affairs and impose order. This relatively new system of control of monastics, however, eventually came to be utilised by senior monks to patrol the 'other-worldly' boundary that defines the monastic status and report any transgressions or dissenting voices through the official channels established by the state. In practice, the government's attempt to impose direct surveillance over monastics relied heavily on particular types of monk leaders: mainly, learned scholars and dhamma teachers in the category of *pariyatti* (scriptural learning), who were intent on preserving the Buddhist orthodoxy and were by nature apolitical conservatives. Nominated by their monastic peers, these monastic representatives were co-opted by the state to make judicial decisions in each of its administrative tiers. This has resulted in the *pariyatti* monk scholars and abbots of large Buddhist seminaries coalescing into a dominant group of standard-bearers for Buddhist orthodoxy, which exercises authority over almost every matter of monastic affairs in contemporary Myanmar.<sup>31</sup>

However, the disenchantment that many of my informants expressed towards the conservatism of this scholarly echelon of the sangha may also be related to the emergence of a performance-oriented exam culture in the monastic community, with the

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<sup>29</sup>Ikuno argued it would be incorrect to conclude that the purge of monks that followed was the result of political intervention alone since widespread cooperation within the sangha establishment lent momentum to the elimination of unwanted heterodox elements in the monastic community (1982, 56).

<sup>30</sup>The Myanmar State Samgha Maha Nayaka Committee lists 655 *adhamma* cases that were brought to Township sangha judicial courts (some were then referred to the District sangha courts) between 1988 and 2015. [www.mahana.org.mm/en/vinicchaya-affairs/vinicchaya-cases-of-state-from-1988-to-2015/](http://www.mahana.org.mm/en/vinicchaya-affairs/vinicchaya-cases-of-state-from-1988-to-2015/)

<sup>31</sup> *Pariyatti* refers to learning and teaching of the *dhamma* contained within the scriptures of the Pali canon. It is contrasted with *patipatti* referring to the practice of *dhamma* in meditation and *pativedha*, which means the realisation of truth. In Myanmar, monastic members engaged primarily in the study and teaching of the Pali canon are put in the category of *pariyatti*.



study of Buddhist texts focused primarily on the passing of annual exams and acquiring Buddhist degrees and titles. Importantly, also, no secular subjects are taught in the monastic community today, unlike in other Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia or Sri Lanka, and this likely means that Myanmar's monks are less familiar with broader secular issues than their colleagues elsewhere. Buddhist scriptural exams were originally conducted by Buddhist kings as a means of ensuring a high standard of monks' moral conduct, and through the study of Vinaya. It was hoped that they would become aware of their moral duties as well as the punishments they would receive if they violated monastic regulations. It was during King Mindon's reign in the late nineteenth century, however, when a major cultural shift took place after which the sangha establishment accepted monastic education to be promoted through formal examinations. Even in the post-independence period, a large part of monastic life in Myanmar continued to centre around formal examinations whereby the state and the sangha, and Buddhist lay enthusiasts came together to promote them (Khammai Dhammasami 2004, 153).<sup>32</sup> Rote learning of canonical passages became essential to passing exams rather than in-depth scriptural study or having a comprehensive knowledge of the texts in question. As noted by Khammai Dhammasami (2004, 56), if they are not part of the examination syllabuses, 'even basic Buddhist texts such as the Dhammapada or Mahavagga of the Vinaya Pitaka' are not studied, and this has resulted in a piecemeal knowledge of Buddhist texts. Moreover, once Buddhist scholasticism came to be regulated by national monastic syllabuses, students became even further confined to a narrow set of doctrinal knowledge, along with 'normative interpretations of the canonical and exegetical texts' without developing a general understanding of them (Kyaw 2015, 412). And yet, the degrees and titles they are awarded on the basis of having passed the scriptural exams attract lay followers and their material support, which in turn further enhance their reputations and positions in the monastic hierarchy.

In daily scriptural learning, complete obedience is expected, and monastic students rarely contradict their teachers or question what they are memorising or why. Hence, despite recent efforts to remedy this situation,<sup>33</sup> many monastic students find it difficult

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<sup>32</sup>The annual *Pathamapyan* is conducted by the government and the Sakyasiha and Cetiayangana examinations are administered by private Buddhist associations.

<sup>33</sup>Thanks to advancement in communication technology, there are more online workshops and conferences in English language medium initiated by learned Myanmar Buddhist monks, for example by Dr Khammai Dhammasami, who delivers regular lecture series at his Shan State Buddhist University in

to express their opinions or original thoughts and are reluctant to engage in open discussion. The most senior monks who serve on the MaHaNa have been selected on the basis of their doctrinal learning and academic titles, and thus are among the least likely people to question or challenge government policy. Meanwhile, the sangha judicial process introduced and endorsed by the state in the early 1980s has provided an official mechanism with which these scholarly monks can suppress any unusual doctrinal interpretations that might trigger dissension within the sangha or threaten the ‘purity’ of *Buddhabatha-sāsana*.<sup>34</sup> They also regard it as essential to preserve and propagate Theravada orthodoxy in the name of *thathana-pyu* or ‘the dissemination of *sāsana*’, which has been an essential political project of the Myanmar state since the 1990s.

## 8. VINICCHAYA AND THE IMPOSITION OF LAW AND ORDER

Naingandaw Ahtù Wini-do Ahpwé, the state-level Vinicchaya committee tasked with controlling the sangha and defining what is and is not orthodox in Myanmar Buddhism, conducted its first tribunal in 1981. The state Vinicchaya committee of judges comprised of senior monks, convened by MaHaNa on an ad hoc basis, comprises three to five monk judges with the highest level of scholarly knowledge of Pali canonical and commentarial texts.<sup>35</sup> In its tribunals, also generally termed Vinicchaya, the sangha judges investigate ‘religious offence’ cases to decide whether monastics’ conduct was *avinaya* and violating the Vinaya, and/or if their alternative interpretations of doctrine are *adhamma*. According to Ashin Janaka (2016, 186), only the Pali canonical and commentarial scriptures endorsed by monk scholars at the Sixth Buddhist Council in the mid-1950s are considered valid criteria for the committee’s judgments of what is correct dhamma and what is not. Between 1981 and 2017, 21 cases were brought before the state Vinicchaya committee, of which three concerned monastic misconduct, and the rest hinged on the degree of misrepresentation or false understanding of Buddhist

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Myanmar, which provides opportunities for local monastic students to engage with international participants in discussions.

<sup>34</sup>Khammai Dhammasami describes how the monastic scholarship in Myanmar, which advocated the ‘pure orthodox Theravada tradition’ led to the withdrawal of Sanskrit language from its national monastic syllabuses (2004, 129-30).

<sup>35</sup>Most of these sangha judges have the title of *ābhivamsa* attached as a honorary suffix to their Buddhist title, implying that they have passed the notoriously difficult Sakyāsīha examination to obtain this prestigious status.

doctrine.<sup>36</sup> It is noteworthy that, however reasonable the cases of alternative interpretation of the doctrine or monastic practices may seem to modernist ears, every monastic defendant so far has been found guilty.

Although the initial purpose of the state-level Vinicchaya was direct oversight of monastic affairs, with a broad aim of purifying the sangha, its tribunals have since functioned as an official channel whereby scholarly monks can eliminate heretical ideas and impose their own notions of orthodoxy, by criminalising monastics who dissent from such notions in the eyes of the secular state. However, the scholarly monks themselves do not seem to be aware that their interpretation of Vinaya violations have been appropriated in such a way by political authorities to put these monks in the category of political dissenters. The state Vinicchaya committee's verdict in the case of Mòpyar Gaing was handed down on 15 November 2011, and MaHaNa immediately issued a statement declaring that U Nyana was *adhamma-vati* and his teaching, *adhamma-vada*. *Adhamma* is a broader and more politically loaded term than *micchā ditthi*, which it has largely replaced in this context. In the media and wider political circles, too, especially since 2011, any particular religious viewpoints that are regarded as threatening to law and order have been called *adhamma* as a means of de-authenticating and discrediting them.<sup>37</sup>

U Nyana was excommunicated for holding 'anti-Buddhist' views that, if allowed to spread, would eventually destroy Theravada Buddhism, which was the view of the Vinicchaya monk judges. His sect was officially disbanded, and all its land and other assets confiscated by the government. Instruction no. 95, issued by MaHaNa on 28 November 2011, forced known Mòpyar followers to sign an official pledge to give up everything associated with it, and to not engage in missionary activities for the sect ever again. While the monks who sat on the tribunals and issued the relevant judgments did not have any powers of enforcement, the process concluded with an official recommendation to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and a decree was made public by the government on 16 December, at which point Mòpyar Gaing became officially outlawed by Myanmar's state giving the authorities to arrest him once again.<sup>38</sup> The direct charges against U Nyana were made under Chapter 15, Sections 295 and 295A of

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<sup>36</sup>The State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, <http://www.mahana.org.mm/en/vinicchaya-affairs/>

Amongst them, there have been no *antimavatthu* cases involving murder or sexual transgression brought to the state Vinicchaya tribunals as most of these sensitive and some criminal cases of monks are dealt with at the township level.

<sup>37</sup>See footnote 14.

<sup>38</sup>The State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, official report no. 17, 2011-ká.

the Myanmar Penal Code, and stated that his offences included deliberate and malicious acts intended to offend the religion and religious feelings of any class, with an intent to insult *Buddhabatha-sāsana*.<sup>39</sup> Much of the hostility directed towards him came from his open challenge to the traditional beliefs and normative interpretations accepted by the majority of Myanmar Buddhists, and consequently the threat he posed to their religious sentiments was transformed into a criminal act.

Myanmar's penal code, based on the Indian penal code, was applied to the then-British colony of Burma in 1861, and remained the backbone of the country's criminal law as successive regimes adapted it to fit changing political conditions. According to Cheesman (2015, 92), however, the original code was not used to regulate religious activities in any specific way until relatively recently; and for many decades, unorthodox interpretations of Buddhist doctrine would not have been considered a valid reason for the state to interfere with the monastic community. Nonetheless, the rebuilding of law and order in society became an urgent priority for the military junta in the post-1988 period, after a crackdown on pro-democracy students and monks; and this shift was bound up with an increasingly pronounced religious nationalism, culminating in the SLORC initiating not only pro-Buddhist policies, but a comprehensive state-sponsored Buddhist-nationalist ideology (Schober 2011, 88-90). Early in the present century, the Myanmar government started to apply sections of the penal code in 'softer' cases against Buddhist monks (Frydenlund 2019, 88), and Cheesman (2015, 31) has described how the Myanmar concept of *ngyeinwut pibya-ye* (law and order) entitled certain groups or persons in positions of authority to impose their own notions of order on their fellow citizens, in the name of restoring it. Hence, the harsh treatment inflicted on U Nyana should be understood in the context of a rapidly changing socio-political climate in Myanmar, especially during the past decade.

From 2011, U Nyana became identified as a 'public enemy', though this was 'not necessarily an offence with any bearing' on the real reasons he was arrested (Cheesman 2015, 115). He was criminalised not only because of his defiant stance against the sangha authority, but because his speech and conduct were seen as influencing people's minds and leading them astray, to a point deemed threatening to the national security. In addition to

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<sup>39</sup>Chapter 15 of Myanmar penal code stipulates the 'Offences Relating to Religion'. The relevant sections in relation to U Nyana are the following two: 295. Injuring or defiling place of worship, with intent to insult the religion of any class. 295A. Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs. See:

[https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs6/myanmar\\_penal\\_code-corr.1.pdf](https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs6/myanmar_penal_code-corr.1.pdf)

sections of the penal code, U Nyana was charged under Sections 5(e) and 5(j) of the 1950 Emergency Provisions Act for disseminating false views, as well as causing disruption to the morality of the general public, under which he was sentenced to further 20 years' imprisonment.<sup>40</sup>

## 9. WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE?

As part of an NLD government amnesty, U Nyana was released from prison in January 2016. Despite his many years of incarceration and advanced age, he has resumed campaigning in favour of a 'this-worldly' application of Buddhism. This determination can readily be linked to the strength of his resistance to establishment attempts to force him to relinquish his 'false doctrine', which had been the main basis for the severity of his punishment. MaHaNa issued a statement on 29 December 2016 to the effect that *Pyitsupan Kammavada Buddhabatha* diminished the fundamental value of Theravada Buddhism, and reiterated its official position from 2011: that the teachings of U Nyana were *adhammavada* and that Mòpyar Gaing was an illegal sect.<sup>41</sup> Following this, U Aung Ko, Myanmar's Minister of Religious Affairs, spoke at a press conference to publicly elaborate the position of the government: that Mòpyar was not a 'Buddhist' sect since its followers did not believe in either *samsāra* or the concept of rebirth, and adding they should not even be regarded as a *gaing*.<sup>42</sup> In an interesting twist, U Wirathu, the monk who became notorious for his '969' campaign against Muslim shopkeepers, spoke about Mòpyar Gaing in an interview on RFA Burmese Radio.<sup>43</sup> He said that U Nyana should keep quiet and stop using the media to promote his ideas, as continuing to do so could jeopardise the teachings

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<sup>40</sup>1950 Emergency Provisions Act 5(e): He who causes or intends to spread false news, knowing beforehand that it is untrue; and 5(j): He who causes or intends to cause to disrupt the morality or the behavior of a group of people or the general public, or to disrupt the security or the reconstruction of stability of the Union. See [https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/1950-Emergency\\_Provisions\\_Act-en.pdf](https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/1950-Emergency_Provisions_Act-en.pdf).

<sup>41</sup>MaHaNa issued a statement on December 29, 2016 to reiterate the position that there are only nine *gaing* or Buddhist sects in Myanmar according to the Sangha Ahpwé-sii Acheigan-sii myen ne; thus, Mòpyar Gaing is *ipso facto* an illegal sect. In response, U Ne Win, the lay representative of Mòpyar group, issued a statement on the following day to say that U Nyana did not insult Theravāda Buddhism, and his teachings were beneficial to the wellbeing of Myanmar people regardless of their faiths; and that there was nothing in the Constitution that rendered his teaching illegal.

<sup>42</sup>U Aung Ko speaks at a news conference in Yangon on January 5, 2017.

<sup>43</sup>U Wirathu speaks on Radio Free Asia (RFA) Burmese radio on January 6, 2017.

of Myanmar Buddhism. Regardless of his own notoriety, he even stated that U Nyana had become *thathana atwin yanthú* (an internal enemy) of Myanmar Buddhism. In fact, this term was first used by MaHaNa in its denunciation of U Nyana as a ‘heretic’, and MaBaTha (Association for the Protection of Race and Religion),<sup>44</sup> – the nationalistic organization of Buddhist monks – also took the same position when condemning him. Despite these attacks and his excommunication from the sangha, U Nyana refuses to comply with the official verdict that his teaching was ‘deviant’ and continues to accuse the state and sangha of their ‘wrong views’.

Today, U Nyana is confined to a small lodging in a remote backwater of Bago, supported by several devout followers in Yangon and Mandalay. He continues to wear sky-blue clothes to distinguish himself from typical Myanmar Buddhist monks, and thanks to advanced communication technology, he keeps in touch with his followers via sermons and various kinds of other messages. His views – although labelled as *adhamma-vada* by the authorities – were not entirely dismissed as deviant or irrelevant by the people I interviewed, who continue to refer to him by the honorific *Sayadaw*.<sup>45</sup> U Nyana, just like Buddhādāsa in Thailand, has directed his main criticism at the echelon of scholarly monks who dominate the monastic hierarchy and the stagnant outlook of the sangha that does not allow meaningful dialogue or the kind of spiritual leadership that might render Buddhism meaningful to contemporary life.

## 10. CONCLUDING REMARKS

A diversity of voices is emerging from the Buddhist community in present-day Myanmar, ranging from the conservative Buddhist nationalism of MaBaTha to the anti-orthodoxy of Mòpyar. The former reflects a strong concern among Buddhist monks that Buddhist morality be preserved from the corrupting forces of modernity, and that Buddhist women be protected from other faiths, whereas the latter has tried to reinterpret Buddhist doctrine to keep abreast of changing practical realities. Whilst the mainstream sangha focuses its efforts on collectively preserving the orthodoxy of Myanmar Buddhism, notably by appropriating the notion of *adhammavada*, Mòpyar has emerged as a radical response to

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<sup>44</sup>MaBaTha is an acronym for Amyotha-batha Thathana Saungshauk-yei Apwe.

<sup>45</sup>In a face to face interview with U Nyana on September 12, 2019, he said that although he wore sky-blue clothes, he continued to abide by the Vinaya regulations in spirit, adhering to the moral discipline and observing the required abstinences that defined him as a monk. Despite his emphasis on ‘this-worldly karma’, Myanmar people ironically address U Nyana as an ‘other-worldly’ monk and do not generally see him as a *weikza* or *bodaw* concerned about ‘this-worldly’ matters.

rigid censorship and the hegemonizing ideology of *Buddhabatha-sāsana*, appealing to the deep frustration felt by the general public about the sangha establishment and the political status quo. As Myanmar society undergoes further secularisation, rapid modernisation and other changes, and increasingly accepts global values, the prevailing conservatism of the sangha is likely to come under increasing scrutiny. Future research could therefore usefully focus on the extent to which U Nyana’s doctrine of ‘this-worldly karma’ has affected Myanmar Buddhists’ beliefs and actions.

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